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The Himalayan Collection of the "Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich" (Ethnological Museum of the University of Zurich)

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The Himalayan Collection of the "Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich" (Ethnological Museum of the University of Zurich)

Gitta Hassler and Susanne Grieder

Translation: Neal Mackenzie

A brief history of the museum

In 1989 the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich celebrated its 100th anniversary. The most important milestones in its history are outlined below.

The seeds were sown in 1888 when the Zurich Ethnographical Society was founded with the avowed goal of establishing an ethnographical museum. The driving forces among the founding members were the zoologist Conrad Keller and the geographer Otto Stoll. The museum was inaugurated the very next year in the cupola of the old stock exchange, and encompassed collections from Conrad Keller (Madagascar), Otto Stoll (Guatemala), Hans Schinz (South-West Africa), Johann Kaspar Horner (South Sea Islands), Gottlieb Spillmann (India) and Hans Spörri (Japan). Otto Stoll was appointed director and remained in office until 1899, becoming the first university member in Zurich to hold the post of professor of ethnography and anthropology. This tradition of combining the functions of museum director and university professor has continued to the present day.

During the period of office of Hans J. Wehrli, a professor of geography and the third person to hold the position of collection director, the collection, consisting entirely of donations, was relocated in the new university building, which was completed in 1914. 1916 saw the opening of what was now the national ethnographical collection of the University of Zurich, and one year later work began on the setting up of an ethnographical library with an archive of photographic material.

The museum experienced a period of considerable growth, both financially and in terms of staff, during the long directorship (1963-1992) of Karl H. Henking, an anthropologist specialising in religion and art who was recently appointed as emeritus professor. The first edition of the Zurich Ethnological Journal (*Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zürich*, now published as *Ethnologische Schriften Zürich*) appeared in 1970, edited by the curators, Walter Raunig and Martin Brauen. A year later the Swiss Ethnological Society (Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft: SEG) was founded with support from various Zurich anthropologists, and in the same year the anthropological seminar was called into being, with Lorenz G. Löffler in the new professorial chair. Now, at last, anthropology in Zurich had achieved the status of an independent discipline, and from then on the collection was known under its

present title of the "Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich". Its present Director is Michael Oppitz.

Its location in the university buildings was not only unfavourable from the point of view of visitors, it also gave it an air of "ivory tower" isolation. Combined with a lack of space as the collection grew in size, these considerations led to the call for a new, self-contained location, a demand that could not be satisfied until 1979 with the move to its present site in the buildings of the former botanical institute in the grounds of the old botanical gardens ("Zur Katz") in Pelikanstrasse.

The main function of the museum is to carry out research on behalf of the university and to act as a sort of display cabinet, bringing the results of research activities to the attention of the general public. Particular emphasis was also laid on intensifying cooperation with schools. Having begun with the aim of providing material for teaching purposes, the collection has evolved into a museum with a strong focus on public relations activities.

The Himalayan collections

Switzerland provides asylum for more Tibetan refugees than any other country except India, Nepal and the United States of America. A whole range of institutions (such as the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, Tibetan Institute at Rikon, University of Lausanne, Historical Museum of St. Gallen, Centre of Tibetan Studies in Mont-Pèlerin) have devoted their energies to this area and are eager to furnish each other with mutual support.

The museum boasts an internationally renowned Tibet and Himalaya collection focusing primarily on: thangkas; instruments used in rituals; wood engravings; and everyday tools and textiles. For reasons of space, only the most important collections - presented first according to collector, and then according to object category - are outlined below, with particularly interesting objects being singled out for special mention.

Hürlimann/Wehrli collection, 1927, 109 objects

In 1926/27 the then director Hans Wehrli undertook an expedition to India and the neighbouring Himalayan territories together with the explorer and photographer Martin Hürlimann. Hürlimann, who was later to found the Atlantis publishing house in Zurich, described his journey to India in 1927 in a special edition of the New Zurich Newspaper (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*) and subsequently published a book on the same subject. The Zurich India expert Emil Abegg examined and catalogued the pieces brought back, most of which were used for worship, and they were shown to the public for the first time in 1929.

Crown of a lama, Nepal

Copper decorated with silver and brass. With representations of the Adibuddha Vajrasattva and the five Tathagatas.

Inv.No 7278; height 43 cm

Prayer wheel, Darjeeling

This large drum stands in a wooden pavilion; it is lined with embossed sheet copper and sheet brass and decorated with glass stones.

Inv.No 7276; height 65 cm

Imhof/Heim collection, 1933, 26 objects

In 1930 the geologist and cartographer Eduard Imhof and the geographer Arnold Heim undertook an expedition to South-West China for the purpose of exploring Minya Konka, the highest mountain in Sichuan. From their collection are taken:

Two clay figures, Tatsienlu

These two figures represent Saints. One of them represents Thang-stong rgyal-po (b.1385), who was the first to perform the stone-breaking ceremony.

Inv.No 8360ab; 16 cm x 10 cm

Harrer collection, 1973, 1108 objects

When the Second World War started, the Austrians Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter were on an expedition to explore Nanga Parbat. After fleeing from internment in India in 1944 they made their way to Lhasa. Harrer remained in Tibet for seven years.

After lengthy negotiations, the canton of Zurich finally succeeded, in 1972, in acquiring the Harrer collection for one million Swiss franks, the money being raised with the aid of the state lottery. The purchase included the library (comprising several hundred volumes), the photographic material and all the written documentation.

The museum has chosen not to store the Harrer collection as a self-contained set of objects, electing instead to spread the various pieces over its overall collection. The Harrer collection includes maps, several amulet boxes, a large number of medium and good quality thangkas with traditional iconographical motifs, and a small collection of Buddhist literature including a particularly interesting book dealing with the various Tibetan scripts.

Saddle, Tibet

Wooden saddle from the estate of the minister Tsarong Dadul Namgyal, finished in sheet bronze and covered by a saddle-cloth of silk brocade with a floral pattern.

Inv.No 14927a; 28 cm x 51 cm

Figure of Chenresi (Avalokiteshvara)

Gold-plated bronze figure with eleven heads and eight arms. Two of the hands embrace Emptiness in front of the breast, and in the three right hands it holds prayer beads (missing here) and the Wheel of the Law. One hand makes the gesture of giving. The left hands hold a lotus

blossom, and a bow and arrow.

Inv.No 14497; 91 cm x 45 cm

Aufschnaiter collection, 1977, 40 objects

The museum contains all the written material from the estate of Peter Aufschnaiter, including the manuscript for a book published 10 years after his death in 1983 by Martin Brauen (*Peter Aufschnaiter - Sein Leben in Tibet*, Innsbruck: Steiger Verlag 1983). There is also a small collection consisting primarily of thangkas, statues and cartographic material (sketches, map of the city of Lhasa, lists of altimetric measurements).

Collection of the Swiss Nepalese Society, 1967-78, 300 objects

In 1971, a number of visitors to Nepal who felt the need to maintain a permanent contact with the country founded the Society of Friends of Nepal ("Verein Freundeskreis Nepal"). They planned a variety of activities designed to keep the public informed of events in Nepal and to encourage them to take a greater interest in the country. The society has a collection of Nepalese pieces, mainly metal objects of the Newar community and objects used in the daily life of tribes such as the Gurung and the Rai. These have been loaned to the museum on a permanent basis.

Seeland collection, 1979, 37 objects

A further 37 objects from the Rai tribe of Nepal - likewise primarily objects from everyday life - were bought by the museum from the private collection of the sociologist Klaus Seeland.

Groups of objects

The objects from the southern Mustang area comprise primarily agricultural implements and objects from daily life, such as a horizontal treadle loom. Further everyday objects from Ladakh and Bhutan, accompanied by a number of musical instruments, were also collected.

Textiles

Materials from the culture of Bhutan are represented above all by a large collection of textiles, originating in part from the estate of Barbara Adams and acquired in 1994 with funds from the lottery. This collection includes:

Shingkha

This garment, similar to the Latin American poncho, was worn on ceremonial occasions by women in certain villages of the Kurtoe district. It is made of wool, dyed in indigo, and has brightly coloured ornamental decorations sewn round the neck section and along the seams at the sides.

Inv.No 21494; 120 cm x 80 cm

Canopy or throne cover

This decorative work can be seen in a blanket, used as a canopy or a covering for the throne of a king or a high-ranking lama. It depicts a circle of lotus blossoms enclosing a phoenix with two blossoms in its beak and, in the middle of each side, a *kinnara* above Mount Meru. A dragon is sewn into each corner, above a *kīrtimukha* entangled in tendrils.

Inv.No 18416; 130 cm x 130 cm

The textile objects also include a small collection of textiles from Tibet. Most of these were contributed by Martin Brauen, but there are also a few objects from the Harrer collection.

Wood engravings

The museum possesses a large collection of Tibetan wood engravings, some of which are together with the original blocks.

Thangkas

The cornerstone of the Tibet and Himalaya section of the museum is the thangka collection. The principle underlying the compilation and extension of the collection lies less in the age of the objects than in their iconography; there are virtually no thangkas from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In assembling the collection, preference was given to rare motifs of particular iconographical interest. Work on extending the collection continues, focusing above all on works by contemporary artists, a particularly fine example of which can be seen in:

Thangka of Kalachakra cosmos

The cosmos as represented in the Kalachakra Tantra, painted in 1991 by the Nepalese artist Kumar Lama. The lower half of the picture depicts the elementary discs, seen from above, and the beings who inhabit them. Mount Meru rises up in the middle of the picture, with the 24 heavens above it; in the middle of the heavens a transparent head can be seen.

Inv.No 21299; 89 cm x 79 cm

Thangka of the Buddha's footprint

Another interesting thangka from Nepal is one with a footprint of the Buddha Shakyamuni on lotus blossoms scattered in the form of a *maṇḍala*. Each of the gold-coloured feet is decorated with a Wheel of Law and four auspicious emblems. The text at the bottom of the picture explains that it was commissioned by way of expiation by a married couple who were prevented from fulfilling mourning rituals by a lengthy period of absence.

Inv.No 19824; 64 cm x 55 cm

Individual objects

In the course of the years, however, the Tibet and Himalaya section of the museum was expanded not only by complete collections of varying sizes but also by a large number of individual pieces, which could be added where appropriate. Objects of this type which are of particular interest include:

500 miniature paintings

The 500 miniature paintings from the category of the tsag-li comprise a total of 4 volumes and constitute a rare find, being the only known version to exist in colour. The paintings probably come from China or Mongolia and can be subdivided into three groups: *Rin-'byung brgya-rtsa*, *sNar-thang brgya-rtsa*, *rDor-'phreng* (Sanskrit *Vajravatī*).

Inv.No 17942; 10,5 cm x 29 cm

Altar fragment

The altar fragment is fashioned in gold-plated copper and depicts a *bodhisattva* (possibly Avalokiteshvara). To the right of this figure are three animals - an elephant, a lion and a fabulous creature - one on top of the other. At the top of this tower, standing on the back of the fabulous animal, is a small human figure. The rest of the surface is taken up with perforated arabesques, and the whole object is bordered by decorated edging. The companion piece belongs to a private collection.

Inv.No 13575; 51 cm x 38 cm

dPal-ldan lha-mo

This gold-plated bronze figure (with traces of red colouring) depicts Lhamo riding a mule while Makaravara walks before her and Simhavara behind her. The mule is making its way through a sea of blood - indicated by the waves on the base - and over the dismembered limbs of corpses.

Inv.No 14113; 18 cm x 8 cm

Exhibitions

Since the early seventies there have been regular exhibitions, each centered on a particular theme and each designed to present selected segments of the museum's panoply of objects to interested visitors.

1. Art treasures from Tibetan monasteries (Kunstschätze aus tibetischen Klöstern), 1972 - 1977
2. Impressions from Tibet (Impressionen aus Tibet), 1974 - 1977
3. Journeys through Tibet (Reisen in Tibet), 1975
4. New exhibits from the Himalayas (Neues aus dem Himalaya), 1977-1979
5. The art and culture of Vajrayana in Nepal and Tibet (Kunst und Kult des Vajrayana in Nepal und Tibet), 1980 - 1983

6. Tibetan merchant nomads in western Nepal (Tibetische Händlernomaden in West-Nepal), 1983
7. Life and survival in Nepal (Nepal - Leben und Ueberleben), 1984
8. Touching allowed: Dancing gods (Berühren erlaubt: Tanzende Götter), 1987
9. Mandala: the holy circle in tantric Buddhism (Mandala - Der Heilige Kreis im tantrischen Buddhismus), 1992 - 1994
10. Somewhere in Bhutan - where women do the talking (Irgendwo in Bhutan Wo Frauen das Sagen haben), 1994 - 1995
11. Spinning, weaving and wearing - textiles from Bhutan (Gesponnen gewoben getragen - Textilien aus Bhutan), planned for 1995
12. Bhutan: an exhibition for children (Bhutan-Kinderausstellung), planned for 1995

Staff

Since 1962, the "Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich" has had a separate department devoted to Tibet and the Himalayas. This department was managed and systematically expanded for a period of thirteen years by Eva Stoll, a daughter of the first museum director. Among her achievements was the initiation of the thangka collection. Martin Brauen came to the museum in 1971 and became Eva Stoll's successor two years later. Since then, as well as occupying the position of vice-director of the museum, he has been in charge of this department and has devoted his considerable enthusiasm to making significant contributions to the scientific research carried out on this region.

The library

The library currently encompasses some 20,000 publications, with approximately 1,700 volumes and some 15 periodicals being devoted to the area of Tibet and the Himalayas. In terms of subject matter, attention focuses on works dealing with art and religion, especially Tibetan Buddhism. The collection also contains the major works on Tibetan iconography and a wide range of travel reports.

The museum library is one of four libraries devoted to Tibet and the Himalayas in Zurich. The others are the Nepal library of the Anthropological Seminar of the University of Zurich, the Nepal library of the Swiss Nepalese Society (housed in the Zurich Municipal Library) and the library of the Tibet Institute in Rikon. Taken together, these libraries constitute an extremely comprehensive collection of the scientific literature available on this subject area.

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